

# Making More of the Marionette

U Htwe pulls some strings to revive Myanmar's 500-year-old iconic art form

By Virginia A Sheridan

A figure appears centre-stage at the dinner theatre in Bagan, Myanmar. She surveys the crowd, head held high, lacquered *hsun-ok* (temple offering container) vessel in her hands. Suddenly her arms begin to shake. Is the container too heavy? Her entire body convulses and she gyrates across the stage seemingly against her will. What demon controls her movements? She struggles to lift the offering and all eyes follow her gaze upward to a man in the shadows, the one who literally holds her 'life' in his hands: the puppeteer.

Standing at 68 centimetres tall, dressed in royal court costume and sporting real human hair, the Spirit Medium marionette seems eerily alive. Thanks to the puppeteer's skillful manipulation of her 18 articulated parts (via two hands and 16 separate strings), she is capable of both delicate gestures and bold acrobatics. She can jump in a 360-degree circle, can wink and move her hinged mouth to the lyrics of a song. On a typical night, she is joined by 28 fellow marionettes – representing the 28 *rupa* (physical forms) of traditional Buddhist texts, an odd ensemble of ogres, hermits, monarchs, and more – all directed by a quartet of puppet masters who manage the movements from a platform above the stage. Hidden through most of the show, the puppeteers reveal themselves at key moments, their movements as graceful/athletic as their *yok-thei*. Literally treated as 'small people', the *yok-thei* are carved with accurate anatomical parts – always covered with detailed, made-to-measure clothing – and are 'awakened' in a ritual ceremony before first appearing on stage.



A puppet group from a collection in Myanmar

that real people might face," explained Kim Maung Htwe, the man credited with bringing international attention to Myanmar marionette theatre via his troupe in Yangon. The puppets were also able to portray people dancing and touching, U Htwe added, "something forbidden in old Myanmar society." Ironically, when dancing was again permitted, the people copied the movements of the wooden 'little people'. Thus Myanmar puppeteers influenced two traditional art forms.

Today, Myanmar's puppet theatres no longer attract crowds of citizens. Instead, the tradition is kept alive for the sake of tourism. "The marionettes lost their popularity when people became more interested in television and cinema," says U Htwe. His dream is to renew national pride in this traditional art form by seeking international exposure. To this end, he has launched a website, performed with his troupe at the *Festival Mondial des Théâtres de Marionnettes* in France, and agreed to be filmed by an Australian production company whose resulting documentary, *Master of Puppets*, has been featured on Singapore Airlines flights.

Given his dedication, most assume U Htwe descended from a long line of puppeteers, but in reality he is a former merchant marine officer. He was inspired to establish his Htwe Oo Myanmar Theatre Company in 2006 partly to spread his passion for Myanmar culture, partly to have a reason to stay home with his family (who all work in the theatre). After diligently studying the art form, he dared to make changes such as matching the gender of the puppet to the puppeteer ("to clearly see the puppet's feelings reflected from the soul of the puppeteer") and adding modern moral stories to the repertoire of traditional Buddhist Jataka tales. "[The puppets] could be used to teach our people about social issues, health and the environment... while showing the world the high standards of our culture and traditions."



An old photograph of a puppet show

Myanmar puppetry dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century Bagan period, to the time when both Buddhist royalty and everyday villagers earned merit by building temples and stupas across the vast and dusty plain. The marionettes were part of the festivities marking these occasions. "Many people sat on trees and scaffolds to watch the performances", wrote the poet monk Shin Maha Rahta Thara in 1484. "They would not go home until sunrise, when the puppet show was in its finale."

Far from being mere performing prima donnas, the puppets served many an important purpose. They were used to educate the masses in literature, history and religion. They set new fashion trends. They re-enacted current events and 'voiced' popular opinion.

"The 'small people' could convey sensitive subjects on behalf of the ruler or his people without the consequences

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